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New Estimates Indicate Missile Gap Is No More

Last Year's Predictions Unjustified, But Soviet Lead May Yet Materialize

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New national intelligence estimates of Soviet missile production indicates the "missile gap" may have disappeared.

The controversial gap may yet come, but intelligence officers say they cannot find enough evidence of Russian ICBM production to say confidently whether the 30-100 combat-ready Soviet missiles predicted a year ago for this time were built.

Military intelligence circles have been arguing for several weeks over a new national intelligence estimate of future Soviet missile strength. Congress always asks for such estimates to support the military budget.

The difficult fact this year, however, is that there simply is not enough evidence of Soviet accomplishments to make a firm prediction either that there will be a missile gap or that last year's worries were unfounded.

Some officers say the United States must assume the enemy is building the missiles it is capable of producing and act to defend itself accordingly. Others say it is more reasonable to assume the Russians did not and will not build the missiles predicted a year ago, and that our own missile plans should be adjusted sharply downward.

President Eisenhower, in the

first public tipoff of the new intelligence dilemma, tentatively took the side of the "no missile gap" faction, but he did not draw the conclusion that our missile plans should be changed.

The Eisenhower comment was in one sentence of Thursday's state-of-the-Union message. "The 'bomber gap' of several years ago was always a fiction, and the 'missile gap' shows every sign of being the same," he told Congress.

There was no elaboration. The only conclusion he drew was that "we must not return to the 'crash-program' psychology of the past when each new faint by the Communists was responded to in panic."

Neither the White House nor Pentagon has had any comment on the remark since.

Over the past two years, however, the "missile gap"—the difference between the number of combat missiles Russia and the United States has—has been the center of a fierce public controversy. Even top administration spokesmen previously conceded that apparently reliable intelligence estimates showed a gap. The only dispute was over its extent and over the best American counter to it.

Former Secretary of Defense McElroy said two years ago the gap would be about 4-1 in Russia's favor. Secretary of Defense Gates said last year that new intelligence had revised the estimate downward somewhat and put the worst period of the gap in 1962 and 1963.

Today, however, Mr. Eisenhower apparently believes the whole controversial gap probably is a fiction.

Pentagon officers say the difficulties in finding missiles and the loss of the U-2 flights has produced a serious "intelligence gap." When administration intelligence agencies predicted a big bomber production program for the Soviets a few years ago, they could

easily correct their mistake when they found a large number of bombers in the air. Now they cannot prove or disprove their past missile predictions.

In the last two years intelligence officers measured Soviet missile factory capacity, missile den-

men training programs and testing efforts, studied statements of Soviet officials and then estimated Soviet ability to build missiles. Combined with reasonable evidence of what the Soviets seemed intent on doing, a calculation of the possible range of missile production was made.

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All three services, and apparently the Central Intelligence Agency, agree that whatever course of action this country takes, the chance of making a wrong decision has increased. With so little hard intelligence information to go on, this country could build billions of dollars worth of unneeded missiles or it could build so few that the Soviets could use their hidden stock for blackmail or even an attack.

The result of the most famous error in recent intelligence estimates—the bomber gap that did not materialize—was to give this country a lucky break, according to the Eisenhower position a year ago. To fill the expected gap, we built extra bombers. When the missile gap was criticized a year ago, Mr. Eisenhower pointed to these bombers as evidence that over-all American strength made up for the Soviet missile lead.

Both "gaps" of course were merely national intelligence estimates of future Soviet actions. The bomber prediction was wrong, as have been predictions of Soviet submarine, tank and troop levels. Other intelligence predictions have been right, however.

The new administration will have to make its own evaluation of missile gap evidence and then defend its position before questioning Congressmen in the next few weeks. CIA Director Allen Dulles will have an opportunity to do this when he makes his scheduled appearance before the House Armed Services Appropriations subcommittee January 23.